

## **Living the Life of a Florentine**

By Maleny Quiroz, Fall 2015

### **Introduction**

Doing a direct exchange with the Università degli Studi di Firenze in Fall 2015 has been surprising to say the least. The first thing that surprised me was the completely different university organization system, which in the beginning made me feel a bit overwhelmed. However, even though it took time to get adjusted to the system, I realized that it was all worth it, for if I hadn't come here I would have never gained a new family, I wouldn't have learned how to speak like a Florentine, and I would have never seen Pope in person in a city that I have fallen in love with.

### **Housing**

Most of the other students that I've met that are studying abroad here usually rent an apartment to live with other international students. I would have had to do the same if it hadn't been for a stroke of luck, that is, having met a Florentine student that was doing her study abroad at SCU a quarter before I came. Because of this, I had the magnificent chance to do a home stay with a very colorful Tuscan family.

The only disadvantage about this is living not so near the university. I was living in Bagno a Ripoli, which is on the outskirts on the south of Florence. I had to take a bus an hour before class starts to get to the downtown, where most of the buildings where classes are held are. Having said this though, it shouldn't stop you from doing a home stay if you have the opportunity. If I had lived in an apartment ten minutes away walking from the university buildings like most of my friends here, I wouldn't have been able to experience the daily fresh homemade meals filled with laughter and lessons on how to speak Florentine like a local.

### **Student Life**

Since all the students commute, there's no need for a campus so all the buildings where classes take place are sprinkled in the downtown and they blend in with all the other buildings. As an international student, you probably won't have access to the school cafeteria or the school library. There is a way to gain access to them, but it's really complicated and they take a long time to process it, so you might not receive the access card to go in them by the time your study abroad program is over. The positive side to this though, is that since you'll be in the downtown, after class you have hundreds of restaurants and cafés at only a few minutes away. The same can be said about public libraries. They're close to the university, absolutely beautiful, and the process to obtain a card is fairly simple and fast.

## **Social Life**

Don't be afraid to talk to people even if your Italian is not perfect. Since the school organization is not the best and schedule times always change, Italians are always forced to talk to strangers to find out information about classes. At first this really intimidated me, but now I see how it has worked to my advantage.

I've met most of my friends here through my host family, school, international clubs, and the church. It took me a while to get to know people because at first I was really closed off (because I was afraid my Italian wasn't perfect) and people had to reach out to me before I started talking. Don't wait like I did. Italians are generally nice and welcoming; they'll appreciate the fact that you're at least trying to speak their language. International clubs, such as ISF or ESN, are a great way to meet people, travel, and practice your Italian since the other international students are still learning the language too. You can find groups like this on Facebook where they post events and trips to other cities for discounted prices. As for meeting locals, what worked for me was joining the youth group at the nearest parish. We talk about different ways of serving the community, growing in our faith, and communicating better with others. We go to different events and even organize some, which opens more opportunities to meeting other young Italians.

## **Engagement**

As for the intensive language, it was everywhere in every part of my day. I was going to a university that's almost exclusively made up of locals, so all the classes were in Italian. Except for my host sister, no one in my host family speaks English or Spanish or French, so I had to speak Florentine Italian everyday with them. In fact, the daily dinner conversations that I had with my host family is what has propelled me to speak, improve my accent, learn Florentine words, phrases, and even songs! At random points of the conversation, the grandma bursts into a song that she remembers (or at times that she makes up) and invites me to sing along with her. This not only opens another realm of the culture, but it also does it in a fun and memorable way. Another way in which I've been able to extend my knowledge of Italian by doing something I enjoy is by going to Mass and involving myself in Parish activities, which leads me to my next point.

## **Religion**

The predominant religion of Italy is Catholicism, which people observe at varying degrees. As you might have seen from what I've written in the previous sections, I immersed myself in this part of the Italian culture. I am also Roman Catholic, however, I don't think that people with other beliefs would easily offend Italian Catholics unless they're purposefully trying to do so. I absolutely loved the fact that there are hundreds of beautiful churches surrounding my university. I could go to Mass after some of my classes, stop and pray on my way to grab lunch, or simply discover a new one and be awed by the beauty! Many of them are a bit hidden, they blend in with the houses, and many times it's also hard to find them open, so if you see that's open, make sure to go in!

Even people who are not Catholic can greatly benefit from the indisputably great architecture, paintings, sculptures, and music. Going to Mass and being part of the local youth group has also been one of the highlights of my trip. Not only was I able to engage in the community in a different level and grow in my faith, but thanks to the parishioners, I was also able to get a ticket to see Pope Francis preside a Mass at the Florence stadium! Words cannot describe how joyous this event was.

## **Leisure**

One of the things that I love about Florence is that you can never run out of things to do. I constantly have to turn down event invitations because of the overflowing amount. One of the treasures of Florence is its art and history, so take advantage of that and visit every possible museum; admission is free on the first Sunday of each month. Looking for a place to study? Go to Biblioteca delle Oblate, what used to be a convent and now stands as a beautiful library with a coffee shop on the terrace that has a magnificent view of the Duomo. I cannot emphasize enough how much I recommend going to all the hidden churches. Two of my favorites are less than two minutes away walking from the most frequented school building, one is Santa Maria Maddalena dei Pazzi and another one is the Basilica della Santissima Annunziata.

Something else that you should know about the SCU direct exchange program with the UniFi...it won't be easy, actually, you'll probably find studying to be quite challenging in comparison to what you're used to doing, but when you sit down for dinner with your host family and burst into song, you'll remember how ridiculously rewarding it is to have another family on the other side of the world. For this reason and for all the ones that I didn't mention (because that would have meant writing a book) I am forever grateful to the Italy Sister County Commission Scholarship Program. Without you I would have not been able to gain the wisdom of the Italian culture, the love of an Italian family, and the memories of living the life of a Florentine.